

# D R A F T

## City of Houston Planning Commission Neighborhood Preservation Subcommittee

### Statement of Purpose

Neighborhood Preservation is not a question of maintaining the *status quo*. Life is marked by change; and the essence of a neighborhood is marked by the pace with which that change occurs.

Houston's continued physical and economic growth is inevitable *and desirable*. But free market development, fueled by rapid appreciation and turnover, does not preserve urban neighborhoods, it tends to destroy them. Most residents would agree, Houston has a problem.

Solutions to Houston's problem lie somewhere in the range *between* the current development environment, in which neighborhoods inside and outside the loop are being lost at an alarming rate, and city-wide zoning, which is not politically realistic at this time.

Houston is a relatively young city, even by American standards, yet its history is rich. Historic preservation has only begun to take hold. Some buildings with significant links to Houston's past are being preserved. But the *character* of a neighborhood lies in its ordinary structures and what they say about the residents who have, over the decades, invested in the fabric of their communities.

In Houston, these neighborhood communities are the smallest, and perhaps most efficient, units of effective social activism. But the common interests that define a neighborhood are vulnerable not only to outside forces of development, but also an internal lack of awareness.

Houston's residents deserve a stable environment for their communities (and property values) to grow, and the right to meaningfully participate in neighborhood planning. Only widespread education and access to the planning process will allow this city's citizens to contribute to *their* city's future.

Planning, by definition, is a deliberative process, yet preservation in Houston is an urgent matter. Our neighborhoods link past to future. The Neighborhood Preservation Subcommittee acknowledges that if nothing is done to encourage reasonable growth, soon, none of what makes this city unique will be preserved except Houston's international reputation as a "city without a past."

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## Subcommittee goals

*Quantify elements of neighborhood character that can be addressed in Houston's Planning and Development Code of Ordinances.* Ordinances addressing prevailing lot size and building setbacks have set precedent by demonstrating the potential effectiveness of using quantitative measures to regulate qualitative aspects related to neighborhood "character". Quantifying other elements of character, such as structural "bulk", will be investigated, as well as graduated development "performance standards" based on existing neighborhood characteristics.

*Open the development regulation process in a meaningful way to neighborhood residents.* The walls of City Hall Council Chambers boast "The People Are The City". But for the people to constructively participate in the growth of their city, they must be informed and have the time act on that information. Since many of Houston's procedural planning ordinances are driven by State statute, legislation may be necessary. Within the City, educational outreach must be designed to leverage existing community activism. (Push vs. pull.)

## Subcommittee products

*Proposed modification of Chapter 42 sections related to prevailing lot size and prevailing set backs*  
(Modifications are intended to refine qualification calculation.)

*Proposed Chapter 42 ordinance adopting "Performance Standards for Development"*  
(Based on the level of contention at our last meeting, these standards must touch somewhere near the heart of the matter...)

*Proposed Chapter 42 ordinance adopting definitions of "Neighborhood Character"*  
(These ordinances would attempt to define intuitive notions of character, including building "bulk".)

*Proposal for the creation of the position of a Neighborhood Planning Liaison.*  
(The Liaison would report directly to the mayor, have an ex-officio seat on the Planning Commission, and perform proactive outreach to communities, regardless of their level of organization.)

*Modification to (or reinterpretation of) Chapter 212 to allow more time for Planning Commission deliberation of platting applications.*  
(Even the City's current, rather liberal, interpretation of Chapter 212 places an untenable burden on residents whose property is directly affected by neighboring development.)